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ABSTRACT

If most mass communications instructors could have their way, they would choose an urban setting in which to organize internship programs for their students. In a large city, with a vast supply of mass media outlets and many dozens of media adjunct organizations, students can choose from many venues to obtain valuable experiential learning. However, there are disadvantages: since the higher paying, more prestigious jobs are urban, students do not stand much of a chance of forming contacts that could lead to a job after graduation. If the rural internship offers more realistic possibilities in the area of job contacts, those possibilities are few in number nevertheless. The University of Tennessee at Martin offers a good example of the advantages and disadvantages of a rural setting. Students at a rural school whose internship is limited to three credit hours because of issues concerning accreditation are left with limited options: (1) doing their internship during the summer at another location; (2) settling for whatever local venue is available; (3) spending a semester at another location for only three credits; (4) or passing up the internship altogether. Rural universities therefore must do everything they can to assist their students by giving professional and financial advice about internships at other locations; by constantly pestering administrators for traveling funds for undergraduates; by cultivating relationships with professionals outside the university; by developing programs to substitute for internships, such as externships (1-day programs) or graduate internships (programs after graduation). (TB)

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Coordinating Mass Communication Internships in a Rural Community

A Paper Presented
to the Seventy-ninth Annual Meeting
of the Speech Communication Association

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There's probably no perfect place for a college or university to be situated relative to mass media internships. However, if I could choose a location, I'd probably prefer a huge metropolis. In a large city, with a vast supply of mass media outlets and many dozens of media adjunct organizations (media production companies, public relations agencies, advertising agencies), students could choose from many different venues to obtain valuable experiential learning:

Also, if one's university limits the amount of credit that can be earned in an internship, an urban college student could enroll in a three-credit internship and still be able to fill out a full-time class schedule at his/her alma mater.

However, there are disadvantages: Since big city media companies pay their employees much more than their counterparts in small towns, most media professionals aspire to work in big markets some day. This means that many urban internships do not provide the student with one of the major advantages of an intern experience: contacts that lead to jobs at their internship venue after graduation. Chances are relatively slim that even a highly successful intern can compete with someone from Des Moines or Salt Lake City who has a good track record, a portfolio and years of experience.

Also, many metropolitan media outlets are union shops. Historically, unions are not fond of interns being utilized for any task that a union member could perform. So unions view their company's use of interns as money out of their own pockets, and they often take steps to minimize the chances of interns replacing union members on the job. At many union shops, this translates into a situation for the intern which resembles "gopher" duty -- go for coffee, go for Danish, go deliver papers -- Watch and learn, but don't touch anything, don't create anything.

On the other hand, internships at the rural college or university have some definite advantages:

- potential hiring opportunities after the internship is over,
- more opportunities for hands-on experiences,
- fewer union-related restrictions.

Especially in Tennessee, but also in many small-market internship venues, unionism is less prevalent. This provides the intern with fewer restrictions to his/her hands-on opportunities. And in smaller-market media, more hiring opportunities exist for entry-level candidates -- our graduates. An intern might be working alongside an entry-level employee when that person decides to change jobs, leaving an opening for which our intern is qualified. This happens more in the small town media outlet than in the big city because many of these smaller outlets are "revolving doors" for entry-level employees. Non-union starting salaries are often much lower than their union counterparts, and after a year or two,

the experienced young employee may be looking to improve his/her salary and employment record with a move to a larger market employer. Since the intern is already doing the job, the employer makes a "safe hire" and loses no productivity to training time during the transition.

This is not to say that internship opportunities in medium to small-town settings always turn out better for the student. Each individual case is different. But when operating a mass media internship program in a small-town university, there are times when one would gladly exchange one's situation for the advantages and problems of big city schools.

At rural colleges and universities, internship coordinators find themselves dealing with quite different issues regarding available transportation, choice, variety, access while taking other courses, potential hiring opportunities after the internship is over and the union situation. I'd like to spend some time discussing these issues, and some of the approaches we have taken to deal with them.

I'm chairman of the Department of Communications at the University of Tennessee at Martin, a campus of the University of Tennessee located in the rural, Northwest corner of the state. UTM serves nearly six thousand students, the majority of whom are Tennesseans who live west of Nashville. Besides providing the university with required courses in oral communication, our department offers three degree sequences: Broadcasting, Public Relations, and News-Editorial (print journalism).

Although all of our faculty assist students in identifying internship venues and may even make initial contacts to introduce students to potential internship supervisors, I've assigned one faculty member to be the internship coordinator for the department, which consists 11 full-time faculty and 200 majors. All paperwork, records, and the official course enrollment section are supervised by this individual. Fortunately for us, this faculty member has professional and teaching experience in all three major sequence areas.

Not counting students, Martin's population is 9,000. The city is five hours from St. Louis, four hours from Nashville, and two-and-a-half hours from Memphis. There are really only two other larger cities within 60 to 90 minutes' drive -- Jackson, Tennessee and Paducah, Kentucky. Relative to media outlets, there are more remote colleges and universities in the U.S., but when you're managing an internship program sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

What kind of choice and variety exists around Weakley County, in which UT-Martin is situated? We have one weekly newspaper in Martin. The nearest small daily is only ten miles away, but its staff isn't much larger than our campus newspaper. The only television station in the county is the campus PBS affiliate -- great practicum experience for our undergraduates, but not much of an internship challenge. The same for on-campus radio. There are a half-dozen commercial radio

stations in this vicinity. There is an ABC TV affiliate 90 minutes' drive south in Jackson, and an NBC affiliate in Paducah, the same distance north. But there is only one magazine (a boating periodical), and no P.R. or full-service ad agencies in Martin. There is an opportunity to work in a graphics shop and in a cable television local advertising bureau -- but that's about it for these parts -- not a large amount of choice for 200 majors.

Another obstacle is transportation -- no rapid transit to draw on, so cars and one's two feet are the dominant means of student transportation. At a resident campus like UT-Martin, the majority of students don't own cars. This presents us with a fundamental problem in commuting to a local or regional internship. If a student does have a car, he/she could, for example, drive ten miles to the *Union City Daily Messenger* and get professional newspaper experience. But, human nature being what it is, an internship on the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* or the *Nashville Tennessean* appears to students more prestigious, and to most, more desirable.

But the logistics of living off campus for an entire semester just to do a three-credit internship is usually a costly proposition for a student and his/her parents. So why not simply increase the amount of credits available to make the semester's investment more worthwhile? 'Good question. Because our department is a candidate for 1995/96 accreditation by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (whose standards stipulate a 3-credit maximum for internships) we can't offer more. Also, because we believe a student should be well-prepared for an internship, our department requires them to wait until completing most of their upper division coursework. This usually means they're ready for internship sometime during the senior year.

A student enrolled at some other university might be able to negotiate something to get around the problem of only being able to earn three credits for an entire semester -- something like taking nine to twelve credits at some other college in the city in which he/she is interning. But, like some other schools, our university has an iron-clad rule that requires students to take every one of their last 30 credits here at UT-Martin. This appears to limit the options our undergraduates have available to four:

- Either the student does his/her internship during the summer (and hopefully can do such an internship within commuting distance of a place to stay, such as a parent's or relative's home);
- students just opt for whatever local internship venue is available;
- students do the away-from-campus internship and earn only three credits;
- or students simply pass up the internship opportunity.

But in this day and age, passing up an internship when most of the communications graduates with whom one is competing is unwise.

But as you learn here in West Tennessee, there are other clever ways to solve problems, and our department has developed its own internship/experiential learning tactics:

- doing everything we can to assist students intent on doing their internships away from Martin: This includes providing professional and financial advice, helping them locate grant and fellowship opportunities, helping arrange for local housing (oftentimes courtesy of the campus housing office of the closest university);
- constantly pestering our administration for funds earmarked for faculty travel in support of internship supervision (and this means <u>not</u> giving up travel money for research-related travel),
- cultivating the very best of relationships between UT-Martin and all our often-utilized local internship venues. An interesting by-product has resulted from this: Many of our local internship supervisors, grateful for all the practical help UTM's interns have been to them over the years, have provided our department with a number of scholarships as a gesture of thanks and support. For example, after a succession of outstanding public relations internship experiences at the Goodyear Tire Company plant in Union City, TN, the company and their director of public relations donated two annual scholarships.
- by inviting media professionals from all over the region to our campus for our annual Media Day (last year, 40 media professionals, half of whom were our graduates, came to campus for a day to share their knowledge and experience with our students). And while they're on campus, we use the opportunity to narrow the distance between us.

- We have also developed two other experiential learning programs, graduate internships and undergraduate externships. Since the average post-graduate job search takes about six months, students who were unable to schedule an internship before graduation often have the time to do one while also conducting a job search. Most of our graduates find that these two activities are extremely complimentary. We define externships as on-site professional experiences which our faculty have built into the required activities of individual courses. An externship is a one-day activity in which a student spends an 8-hour shift "shadowing" a media practitioner at his/her job. For example, each of my television news students spends a day following a TV news reporter around the newsroom, on location working on a story, in the editing room, etc. Since externships are one-day affairs, the logistics are much easier to arrange. Feedback from our students' externships indicate that their experiences are usually the highlight of that semester's course.

So, although there are some disadvantages to managing internships in a rural setting, there are also creative ways to deal with them.

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